

# Arlington National Cemetery

from Army News Service

The American flag flutters at half-staff more often than not at one of the nation's top tourist spots, and the mournful strains of "Taps" is likely to arouse conflicting emotions in visitors' hearts. Is it sorrow they should feel, or pride for the heroes buried there?

More than 285,000 people have been laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery. Across its rolling hills stand the unadorned headstones of veterans from the Revolutionary War to the current struggle in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The people buried here are remembered every single day. That brings families a lot of comfort," said Tom Sherlock, the cemetery's historian.

## The Beginning

Arlington National Cemetery was just a potter's field at its start in May 1864. So bloody was the Civil War that existing cemeteries grew over-crowded, and many families were too poor to have Soldier's bodies shipped home for burial. The urgent need for land led then-Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton to declare that the property around Arlington House be used as a military graveyard.

Within two months 2,500 Soldiers had been buried at Arlington and by the war's end a year later, more than 5,000 men had been interred there. The number mounted as bodies were collected and moved to the cemetery from temporary graves. Of all the Civil War dead buried in Arlington Cemetery, about 4,000 are unknown.

The first funerals held at Arlington weren't the refined, honorable affairs they're known to be today. Government-issued headstones were then wooden, and names were often misspelled.

Only upon the deaths of Civil War survivors did the cemetery begin its ascent as a national shrine.

"Dying generals wanted to be buried near their comrades and in the area of Arlington," Sherlock said.

Today Arlington is the preferred burial site for many of America's veterans. Soldiers from every war – of every age, sex, race and creed – are buried there.

Many veterans dream of being buried here," said John C. Metzler, the cemetery's superintendent. "These grounds speak of dignity and respect, and the magnitude of the cemetery guarantees that America will never forget service members' sacrifices."

Approximately 25 funerals occur each day at Arlington. Some of these are final farewells to older veterans. More than 50 recent funerals have been for service members killed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Metzler said.

Of the 184 people who died in the Sept. 11 attack on the Pentagon, 64 are buried in Arlington. Fifty of those victims are located in Section 64, which overlooks the Pentagon's west side where the hijacked plane crashed.

The headstones carry the names of two U.S. presidents, explorers, literary figures, astronauts, Supreme Court justices, World War II hero Audi Murphy and big-band leader Glenn Miller.

Section 27 holds the remains of nearly 3,800 former slaves who lived and farmed in Freedman's Village during and after the Civil War. This piece of Arlington land was sectioned off and given to the slaves by the federal government. So as not to be confused with the graves of "heroes," their headstones were marked "citizen" or "civilian."

## Burial at Arlington National Cemetery

Burial at Arlington National Cemetery is an exclusive honor, restricted to honorably discharged service members who fit the following categories:

- \* Service members who die on active duty, except those on duty for training purposes only
- \* Active-duty Retirees
- \* Reserve retirees age 60 and above who are drawing retired pay at the time of death and who have served a period of active duty for more than training purposes
- \* Veterans who have been awarded the Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross, Air Force Cross, Navy Cross, Distinguished Service Medal, Silver Star or Purple Heart
- \* Former Prisoners of war who died on or after November 30, 1993
- \* Widows and widowers of service members who are officially determined missing in action

\* Spouses, widows, widowers, minor children, permanently dependent children and certain unmarried adult children of eligible veterans (when spouses or children die first, service members must agree in writing to be buried at the same site)

\* When certain conditions are met, service members may be buried in the same grave with a close relative already buried at the cemetery.

Individuals eligible for burial may opt for inurnment at the cemetery's columbarium complex. Eligibility for inurnment also extends to honorably discharged veterans (regardless of how many years they served), their spouses and dependent children.

Each columbarium niche has room for two urns and is sealed with a marble plaque that bears the names and years of birth and death of those within.

Burial arrangements, including burial-site selection, are made only upon the death of the individual. Arrangements are typically coordinated between staffs at the deceased's funeral home and the cemetery. Cemetery staff can also help schedule use of the nearby Fort Myer Chapel, as well as a military chaplain when a family minister is not preferred.

Families bear no costs for graves or columbarium niches, for the opening and closing of graves, gravesite care, burial flags or government-issued headstones.

Requests for exception to burial eligibility are accepted only upon a veteran's death. The requests should include the name of the deceased, reason the deceased should be favorably considered, and all documentation of military service, the point of contact's day and evening phone numbers, and a completed copy of the cemetery's public disclosure form, which is available by calling (703) 607-8545.

Requests should be faxed to (703) 607-8543 or mailed to Superintendent, Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington VA 22211-5003. Requests are generally answered by phone within 48 hours.

The cemetery staff can arrange for military funeral honors of enlisted members, commissioned officers and warrant officers at both in-ground burials and inurnment ceremonies. Enlisted honors include pallbearers, a firing party to fire the three-rifle volley and a bugler to play "Taps." Caisson, band and escort troops are added to the honors for commissioned and warrant officers.

For information on burial at other national cemeteries, go to the Department of Veterans Affairs' National Cemetery Administration Web site at [www.cem.va.gov](http://www.cem.va.gov).

## The Visitors

The cemetery draws 4.5 million visitors each year. Most consider their visits a tour of American history and spend about two hours walking grounds that Metzler deems "magnificent." Tourists commonly see funerals and hear the firing of rifles in the background.

Many are drawn to the gravesite of President John F. Kennedy and the Tomb of the Unknowns. Kennedy's grave is marked by an eternal flame, an idea conceived by Jacqueline Kennedy to show the word that her husband had also given his life for America.

The Tomb of the Unknowns is guarded around the clock by Soldiers of the Army's 3rd U.S. Infantry (The Old Guard). The tomb holds the remains of one unknown each from World War I, World War II, and the Korean War.

The crypt for the unknown of the Vietnam War has been left empty since the remains that were originally entombed there were disinterred in 1998, identified as those of Air Force 1st Lt. Michael J. Blassie and then reburied near his family's home. The crypt was rededicated in 1999 to service members lost and missing from all wars.

Arlington is one of more than 130 national cemeteries. It and the Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemetery in Washington D.C., are the only two managed by the Army. The rest fall under the Department of Veterans Affairs' National Cemetery Administration.

Though burial space has become limited, Sherlock and Metzler agree there's no need for concern. The rate of in-ground burials has decreased slightly since the 1980 opening of the columbarium complex, which will eventually provide space for up to 100,000 cremated remains.

Metzler walks the cemetery grounds each night. "I enjoy the solemnity, although it's emotional to reflect on the thousands who are buried here and the ones who are unknown," Metzler said.

On Memorial Day weekend, visitors find American flags at every grave and columbarium niche. Each year Soldiers of the Old Guard spend three hours conducting the "Flags-In" ceremony before the holiday.

## The Grounds

Memorials are scattered throughout the cemetery grounds. These symbols pay tribute to the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, the Construction Battalion and even those who died on the space shuttle Columbia. There's also the Confederate Memorial, despite popular belief that Arlington was a burial site for Union Soldiers only.

The cemetery's beauty is nurtured by more than 100 federal employees, plus contractors from 14 companies.

"We have very dedicated employees who love their jobs. The cemetery is internationally known, so everyone takes great pride in working here," Sherlock said.

The grounds-maintenance team prunes more than 8,000 trees, cuts grass, sets and cleans headstones, removes snow and even pitches in on janitorial duties. Workers are often toiling away at dawn to keep out of the way of funerals and tourists.

## Hallowed Ground

Visitors to the cemetery are expected to behave respectfully. "Please remember these are hallowed grounds," reads a sign outside the visitor's center.

From Sherlock's view, every American should reflect on the costs of war, and the sacrifices made to protect peace.

Of all the people Sherlock has met in almost 30 years as the cemetery's historian, it's not the visits of American presidents, Prince Charles and Princess Diana, or Mikhail Gorbachev that have impressed him the most.

"What I remember most are the families, especially the children, and the heartbreaking impact that death has on them," Sherlock said. "It gets into your heart and soul."

Arlington National Cemetery opens at 8 a.m. daily. It closes at 7 p.m. April through September, and at 5 p.m. October through March. The customer-service desk at the visitor's center has a directory of gravesites and columbarium niches. For directions, visit [www.arlingtoncemetery.org](http://www.arlingtoncemetery.org).